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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the school factors that affect the academic achievement of black urban high school students. An examination of changes in the academic achievement of the members of a class of 148 students between the sophomore and senior years found the following changes: (1) 4 percent of those who had been classified as "high achievers" as sophomores had become "low achievers" by their senior year; (2) 22 percent of those who had been classified as "average achievers" as sophomores had become "high achievers" by their senior year; (3) 6 percent of those who had been classified as "average achievers" as sophomores had become "low achievers" by their senior year; (4) 10 percent of those classified as "low achievers" as sophomores had become "average achievers" by their senior year; and (5) 10 percent of those classified as "low achievers" as sophomores had become "high achievers" by their senior year. Interviews with three of the students confirmed the importance of the following school factors in achievement changes: (1) black stereotypes; (2) school ethos; (3) resources; (4) quality of instruction; and (5) external support systems. A list of 15 references is appended. (FMW)

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High School Context and Black Student Performance

by

Norris M. Haynes

Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting
of the American Educational
Research Association
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The American innercity is a veritable battlefield with many and varied forces at war for the minds and lives of America's youth. At the center of this struggle is the urban public school with a population that is typically minority, low income and underachieving. The term underachieving is underscored to emphasize the discrepancy between these students' potential and their actual school achievement.

Ideally, the urban public school should be perceived as a beacon of hope and a training ground for the cultivation of basic skills needed for a successful adult life. This conception, however, often appears to be more mythical than real in view of the consistently high rates of school failure among urban minority students. The National Coalition of Advocates for Students reported in 1985 that one in four students who enrolls in the ninth grade drops out before graduating from high school. For black students, the dropout rate is just under twice that for white students and the dropout rate for hispanic students is more than twice that of white students. College attendance rates for Black high school graduates, according to the report, declined steadily between 1977 and 1982. In 1977, the rate was 50 percent, declined to 40 percent in 1981 and fell to 36 percent in 1982. Among native Americans, especially those in urban high schools, the dropout rate is about 48% and climbs to as high as 88% in some schools. In Chicago and New York dropout rates among Puerto Rican students have been reported to be as high as 70 to 80 percent.

What accounts for these disparities in achievement and school adjustment between minority and white students? Social and school context factors appear to contribute more to the variance in school performance than personal and ability factors (Brookover). Most of these cross-racial comparisons are between white students in more affluent communities and schools, and minority students in poor urban communities. Rutter et al (1979) noted that: "schools constitute just one element in a complex set of ecological interactions and are constrained by a variety of societal forces outside their immediate control" (p.). Yet they note that schools have considerable influence on the academic performance and life chances of students.

Academic failure and dropping out of school are only two aspects of the urban gestalt that characterizes the lives of many, though not all and probably not even the majority, of minority innercity students. Crime, violence, negative peer influence, poverty, prejudice, a sense of alienation and uncaring insensitive adults are some of the other destructive elements with which these students contend on a daily basis. Fortitude, resilience, dreams, street-wiseness and some supportive caring adults are some of protective positive elements of their experiential gestalt.

Often the educator's view of the student's world is totally different from the student's view of his or her own world, and students often view educators and the education process differently from how educators view themselves and the education process. The tendency on some educators' part to see the student in isolation

from the rest of his or her phenomenological world reduces the effectiveness of these educators. There is also a tendency for some educators to be constrained in their teaching of and interactions with minority students by their very narrow focus on the perceived limitations of these students. The challenges and opportunities offered by the urban environment and the positive attributes of the urban learner are often missed or simply ignored.

There are several important challenges which urban educators and policy makers face in seeking to address the problems of urban education, especially at the high school level. Based on their work in London secondary schools, Rutter et al (1988) identified ten critical aspects of the high school milieu that influence student performance. These are: 1) school values and norms, 2) expectations and standards, 3) models provided by teachers, 4) feedback, 5) consistency of school values, 6) pupil acceptance of school norms, 7) shared activities between staff and pupils, 8) pupil positions of responsibility, 9) success and achievement, 10) contra-school peer groups. These ten factors are appropriate to any discussion about how best to improve the climate of urban high schools in America's innercities. However, there are other considerations which are discussed below. These are: 1) overcoming stereotypes of the urban minority student, 2) creating a school ethos that supports strong educational development, 3) investing adequately and consistently in the necessary resources, human and physical capital to provide quality education, 4) improving the quality of instruction, 5) establishing and maintaining linkages

with other facets of the community.

Overcoming Stereotypes

There are pervasive stereotypes about urban minority students. They are perceived and believed by many, even those who teach them, to be unambitious, unmotivated and incapable. While there is evidence to suggest that the achievement of minority students in urban schools does not match their potential, the negative stereotypes are totally false, unfounded and damaging to present and future well being of these students.

The importance for these students to derive a good sense of academic self and to obtain feelings of self efficacy concerning positive educational outcomes has been documented (Brookover, 1964; Bandura, 1989; Schunk, 1984) and must be recognized. A full awareness of the strengths and capabilities of urban minority students can help to reduce educators' misjudgment and mislabeling of students while at the same time helping educators to respond effectively to the special needs of this population.

Creating a Positive Ethos

As a social organization, the school develops a culture of its own with norms and standards of behavior. Problems arise when conflicting norms, values and standards evolve, or are brought by subgroups in the school and there is cultural insensitivity, discrimination and intolerance by educators. A cohesive climate, in which everyone is respected, is the basis for trust, full participation and meaningful involvement. The evidence shows that a supportive, caring, culturally sensitive and challenging school

climate is a significant factor in the degree of school success experienced by urban students. Brookover (1979) reported that 80% of the variance in student performance could be accounted for by school variables. Pallas (1988) reported significant correlations between certain school climate measures and student achievement. Rutter et al (1979) went as far as to suggest a possible casual relationship between students' school progress and the schooling process. They noted:

> the pattern of connections (among various factors including school) is complex. It is nevertheless clear that within this network, schools have a considerable degree of choice in how they are organized and that teachers have a similar choice in their decisions on how to respond to the children they teach (p.81).

Resources

Discussions about the effectiveness of urban high schools often fail to address the critical factor of adequate resources and consistent financial support for essential academic and social programs. As indicated earlier, comparisons are consistently made between the achievement of students in poor urban high schools and those in wealthier suburban schools, without similar comparisons of available resources, per pupil expenditures and opportunities. One such recent comparison revealed that in the State of Connecticut the wealthiest school district spent four times as much per pupil as did the poorest school district and had the highest test scores on the Metropolitan Achievement Test (Shapiro, 1991). The National

Coalition of Advocates for Children (1985) reported gross inequities in school financing between wealthy and poor schools. In Massachusetts the reported per pupil expenditures vary from as high as $5,013 in wealthy districts to as low as $1,637 in poor districts. In Texas, the top 100 school districts spend an average of $5,500 per child compared to an average of $1,800 for the bottom 100 districts. Other studies reported as much as a $30,000 difference per classroom between classrooms in rich and poor districts.

Most poor school districts are in the inner cities of Urban America where an overwhelming majority of the students are minority students, primarily black and Hispanic, from low income families. The lack of consistent funding to support very badly needed educational and social programs in urban high schools is destroying the ability of these schools to adequately prepare youth for life in the American mainstream. There are some who argue that there is no relationship between education spending and student performance. They use such indices as teacher salaries as measures of spending. While teacher salaries should be competitive and teachers must be rewarded for their diligence and hard work, high teacher salaries do not necessarily guarantee a higher quality of education. Schools need good state-of-the-art equipment to challenge students educationally, strong effective social programs to recognize and capitalize on the cultural diversity and creativity of their students, as well as to teach new more adaptive, social interaction problem solving and career development skills.

Quality of Instruction

I recently spoke to a group of teachers in an urban school district and as part of my remarks addressed the importance of feedback to students. I mentioned that one important aspect of effective feedback is "specificity". One teacher did not know what "specificity" means. Quite frankly, I was embarrassed, disappointed, shocked and petrified all at the same time. How could a school teacher entrusted with the academic development of, in this case, predominantly black children not know the meaning of specificity. A broader disturbing question is how is it possible for students in urban schools to be proficient academically if they are taught by incompetent teachers? Fortunately, most teachers in urban schools are competent, diligent and dedicated professionals. Unfortunately, there are far too many who are not. Teachers must model attitudes and behaviors consistent with good scholarship and intellectual curiosity if we are to expect our students to perform well academically. After all, we are the most powerful academic role models for our students. Ferguson (1990) reported significant correlations between teacher competence as measured by scores on teacher certification exams and student performance.

The Committee for Economic Development (1987) reported that schools' ability to attract the most qualified individuals as teachers has been considerably curtailed due to competition from more lucrative fields. Another concern is the preparation that teachers receive in schools of education particularly preparation for working with urban populations. (Feistritzer 1983, Haynes

1989). In a recent conversation I had with student-teachers at a university in an urban setting, the student-teachers indicated receiving no pre-internship preparations for work in the urban schools where they were placed. They received no information on cultural diversity, or instructional strategies that would increase their effectiveness as urban educators.

Community Linkage

Urban schools are part of a constellation of services to the children and families in their communities. The connections between students' learning in school and their future health, economic conditions and social status have been well documented (Schorr, 1989). Furthermore, the prospects for social mobility and the perceived payoffs of graduation from school affect students' motivation to achieve. (Foster, 1990).

Establishing linkages between schools and community agencies and programs is essential to the academic development of urban students. A strong connection between the urban school at any level, but especially at the high school level, and the network of social services available can serve to reduce the social distance between schooling and real-life existence.

The Committee for Economic Development (1985) outlined and discussed several strategies for strengthening the relationship between communities and schools. The report emphasized the role of business partnerships and identified three key types of private sector involvement: 1) funding, 2) program involvement, 3) policy involvement (p.87). The report also mentioned vocational training

and cooperative education as potentially effective strategies.

Beyond the support of business, urban high schools must become one of the major centers of community life. This would require that schools host more academic, social development and recreational activities for longer hours, evenings, and on weekends. We must adjust our thinking and redirect the investment of our resources to provide what our children need to succeed in life. Edward Zigler of Yale University developed the concept of the 21st century school which would provide pre-school services to teachers and children on a daily basis, including child care. High schools of the 21st century must provide equivalent support to its students and their families. Teachers and administrators, unions, school boards and local and federal government agencies must negotiate and develop policies that are driven by genuine, unwavering concerns for students' needs.

The situation in urban America is critical, and the immediate transformation of the urban school form a limited partner to a full partner in the enterprise to save and fully develop lives of children and youth must occur immediately. We must win the war in our innercities. We must win the war against crime, violence, homelessness, poverty, teen pregnancy, school dropout, discrimination and hopelessness that threaten and diminish the lives of children in urban America. The urban high school has to be fully armed and ready to be on the winning side.

Investigating High School Performance

During 1985-86 our research team conducted a study in a large

urban, and predominantly black high school to examine factors which might be contributing to the inordinately high number of failing grades among members of the sophomore class. As part of our investigation, we examined the achievement of the entire sophomore class and on the basis of Quality Point Average (QPA which is a form of GPA except that the difficulty level of courses are assessed and computed as part of QPA), we classified students into three groups only for the purpose of our investigation. High achieving (QPA>10), Average Achieving (10>QPA>7) and Low Achieving (QPA<7). The highest possible QPA was 17.

There was a total of 148 students in the sophomore class. Of these, 50 (34%) fell into the high achieving group, 50 (34%) fell into the average achieving and 48 (32%) fell into the low achieving group. We examined the differences between the three groups of students on measures of self-esteem, motivation, study behavior, attitudes toward learning, self-assessment and attendance. We found that the low achieving group differed significantly from the average and high achieving groups on most of the measures but that the average and high achieving groups did not differ significantly on any of the measures. This led to the conclusion that some other school related factors might have accounted for the achievement differences between high and average achieving students.

We further found that significantly more males than females were among the low achievers (38 males to 10 females, a 3.8 to 1 ratio). Conversely significantly more females were among the high achievers (33 females to 17 males, an almost 2 to 1 ratio). Upon

closer examination of the data we found that females scored significantly higher on many of the measures though not on all of them, leading to the conclusion also that some context factors might have contributed to some of the gender differences.

The results of our original study were reported in an article published in the Journal of Educational Research in 1989.

Present Study

The present study was a follow-up investigation of the academic standing of the sophomore cohort we first studied in 1986.

In the spring of 1989 we returned to the High School and collected achievement information on all 148 students who were at that time completing their senior year. On the basis of these data, we reclassified students into the three achievement categories: high, average or low achieving using the same criteria established in the original study.

Results

A. Reclassification

Among the original group of 50 high achievers, two (20%) had changed their status, two (4%) had become low achievers and eight (16%) had become average achievers. Of the ten, five each (50%) were male and female and both students who had become low achievers were female. One of the ten, a female was a Macy student (Macy is a special program that selects students on the basis of their potential for college and focuses on preparing students for careers in the sciences) who had become an average student.

Among the original group of 50 average achieving students, 14 (28%) had changed to either high achievers or low achievers. Eleven (22%) had become high achievers and three (6%) had become low achievers. The new group of high achievers included five males and six females. The low achievers included two females and one male. Two Macy students were among the eleven students who became high achievers.

Among the original group of 48 low achievers, fifteen (31%) were reclassified as either average or high achievers. Ten (21%) became average achievers and five (10%) became high achievers. Of the fifteen reclassified, eleven (23%) were males and four (>7%) were females. Of those reclassified as average, eight were males and two were females. Of those reclassified as high achievers, three were males and two were females.

B. Interviews

To determine some of the possible reasons for students' having experienced a change in achievement status in either a positive or negative direction without any specific intervention designed to influence such change, we designed an interview protocol and planned to interview all thirty-nine students whose achievement status changed. Due to time constraints and logistical difficulties we were unable to interview students before their final day at Hillhouse. We however, obtained addresses and telephone numbers of some of the students, and were able to call them to arrange interviews. We were able to interview only six of these students. Of the six, two were high achievers who changed

status, one to average and one to low; three were average achieving students all of whom changed their status to high; one was a low achieving student who was reclassified as average achieving. Three interviews were successfully recorded and permitted more accurate transcription and recall. These three interviews are used for the analysis presented below. The students are identified as student A, B, and C to protect their identities.

Narrative Reports of Interviews

Student A

Student A, a black male was originally classified in 1987 as an average achiever based on a QPA of 7.17 at the end of his sophomore year. At the end of his senior year in 1989 he was reclassified as a high achiever based on a QPA of 11.0. This student graduated from high school in 1989.

Present Status

At the time of the interview this student was working. He had begun attending school at a state technical college but discontinued. His reason for discontinuing was that he changed his mind about his career choice which was graphics communication. He said that he was in the process of changing schools.

High School Experience

Student A characterized his high school as a place of challenge, high expectations and support. He asserted that teachers were hard and that they pushed him to do his best. They also were caring and supportive. For example, in response to a question by the interviewer, student A responded:

> They (teachers) talked to me outside of class. They would take time out on their own so I could come back if I didn't understand the work. Come back, sit down with me one on one; show me what I was doing wrong; and how I could do something better to improve my grades.

Later on in the interview the following exchanged occurred:
Interviewer: Was that (teacher support) important to you.
Student A: Yes, cause I felt like somebody did care if I passed or failed the class.

This exchange seemed to reinforce student A's perception that teacher's interest and commitment were significant factors in his improved academic performance at his high school.

Student B

Student B, a black female was a senior at the time of the interview. She was originally classified as a high achieving student based on a QPA of 9.67 in 1987, at the end of her sophomore year. In 1989 she was reclassified as a low achiever with a QPA of 2.60 and was at the time repeating her senior year.

Present Status

At the time of the interview, this eighteen year old student had two boy children. She had the first child during her junior year and the second child one year later. She lived with her mother and an aunt.

Student B indicated that right after she finished school her

plan was to find a job. These are her exact words;

> I am going to work because I have two kids to take care of and I can't be sitting around. I'm not saying going to school would be wasting time but I have two kids to take care of so I have to go and get a job.

When queried about how she supports her children and whether her children's father helps she responded:

> Yes, when he feels like it. Other than that I do everything myself and I feel good about it; cause I take care of my kids myself and can't nobody say I don't take care of my kids, cause I do.

We further investigated where student B expected to get a job. This was her response.

> Oh, I don't even know but like my aunt and my grandmother they all work at a convalescent home. They could throw in a good word for me. Other than that, I am going to try, cause I don't want a job in McDonalds or nothing like that, later for that check would be gone as soon as I cash it. I got to get a real job. I was planning on going to Stone and become a medical assistant but I guess that could wait for at least a year or so.

We asked student B why she felt as confident as she did about

being able to raise her two children with such little support. She responded:

> It's going to happen; I am going to make it happen. I have to, cause nobody else is going to sit around and take care of my kids. I am going to have to do it myself. So that's something I am going to have to do.

High School Experience

Student B was in her fifth year at her high school. She indicated that she was still in school because she became pregnant the year before and was sick all the time. She added: "this year I came to school as much as I can. All my grades are good, so I'll be graduating this month.

When asked whether she could talk to teachers or other members of staff about concerns or problems, student B identified two teachers with whom she had a fairly good relationship but then quickly added:

> Some teachers like to get all in your business so that they can go and talk about you. I ain't going to mention no names."

We queried student B about her perception of and her liking for her school. She was generally negative in her assessments. Here is what she said:

> That other school (a school in a more affluent section of the city where half the students were white. Student B's school is in a very

> poor section and almost all black) has all them outside activities out of school activities for their seniors, we are not doing anything; we have a senior field trip planned but it might be canceled because don't nobody want to get involved with it. The other school, they went to Mexico for a week. This school don't do nothing like that. The other school has fund raisers. We don't do nothing

When asked what could be done to make school better, student B replied:

> You have to make it interesting. They just tell you to come to school, sit in your class. After that it's over with. They don't make it interesting. Like when we were freshman. We had talent shows, dances, they don't have none of that anymore; they don't have nothing; they just say go to school, learn and go home. That's it; it's no fun no more.

When we asked student B whether her parents were involved in her schooling, she replied:

> No, my mother she'll try to help but some things she just don't understand and other then that, I do it on my own.

Student B added that her mother meets with her teachers only "when something happens".

Student C

Student C, a black male was originally classified as a low achieving student based on a cumulative QPA of 2.75 at the end of the 1985-86 school year. Based on a cumulative QPA of 7.00 at the end of the 1988-89 school year student C was reclassified as an average student.

Present Status

At the time of the interview student C was a senior. He had repeated his junior year. He indicated that although he was doing better overall than he did during his freshman and sophomore years, that his grades had dropped slightly in the past months. He attributed this decline to the fact that he had been shot and had to miss school. These are his own words.

> Mine (grades) got better since my freshman and sophomore year. They dropped the last couple of months since I had got shot; so I missed a lot of school. So I have been trying to be a good boy now. But basically its been better since my freshman and sophomore years.

When we asked student C what accounted for his overall academic growth, this was his response.

> I felt like a fool not being the only one in my family not graduating. I had to. My mother's a teacher and everything. I think I would have insulted her by not getting my

diploma and stuff like that.

When asked about his having been shot, student C responded:

> I was in a bar, you know. We started fighting and stuff like that and people started shooting and I just caught a bullet; a stray bullet but now I am considered a hoodlum since I got shot. They kicked me out of school because I got shot. They thought it was something drug related and stuff like that so I had to go into the superintendent just to get back to school and all that.

We followed up on student C's experience with having been shot and want to come back to school. We asked:

So were you kicked out of school or did you just come right back after?

Student C responded:

> The first time I tried to come back they told me to get out of school. I was injured. They told me I had to leave or I was going to get arrested and stuff like that, cause it was some part of their policy. Now if you get shot you are going to get kicked out of school. So I had to call my mother, we had to make appointments with the superintendent and talk to him. So then he didn't even let me back in school after a while. That was after

> about two weeks, two or three weeks after I got shot.

The School

We inquired about student C's perception of the school environment. In response to a question about how easy it is to talk to teachers and other staff, student C responded in the following way:

> I don't really talk to no teachers. I really keep it to myself, (otherwise) I have everybody else talking about it. They already think I a hoodlum now, since I got shot. So I don't need to talk to none of them now.

We asked student C to elaborate on his relationship with teachers. He stated:

> I don't trust these teachers. I don't trust them... It's (being shot) none of their business first of all. Then as I say, they always think I am a hoodlum, so why should I talk to them. They already think bad of me already. So let them keep thinking that. I show them in the long run.

We insisted that there must be something about the school that may be positive. Student C conceded this point and quickly countered it. He stated:

> There's a lot that's good about the school but

there's a lot that could be better.

"Like what" we asked.

He replied:

> Like just for instance, the vocation wing, that's when I just come out of my carpentry class; half of our machines are broke, I've been there all three years in the same school and I only used four machines in there and the machine shop has about 20 machines in there and only about four or five of them work. You see what I'm saying. That's making us feel a little bad because we can't get the best we can get, so I can do my best work and stuff, though, the school's alright.

We asked student C what he would change about his school. He responded:

> Classes are alright, maybe if the teachers, I mean the principals wouldn't act like cops and stuff like that, that would be a lot better. They'd have more people coming to school and stuff but they act like they are the police anyhow, so a lot of guys just stopped coming. Why they, got to act like that. It was already bad enough. They were there to harass when we, at our homes and stuff like that; to get harassed at school that makes a person not

want to come.

Student C had some important things to say about graduation:

> I thought I would graduate by now. Realizing I didn't it's made me better though. It make me realize my goals that I had to get out of this school and do something with my life cause going to school was easy for me; everything was going too easy for me. I used to be able to cut classes and no teachers would say nothing to me. I still come back and pass that class and everything like that. Then when I broke my hand I had stayed back. I missed a lot of days when I broke my hand. After that I started realizing I got to go to school to get my education. Can't look like no dummy in this world. You ain't going to be able to do nothing in this world if you ain't got no high school diploma. It's bad enough people with college diplomas. I see my brother; he has a college diploma and he's still having a hard time now and he's graduated from college. It would have been a lot harder for me not graduating from high school. So I had to go back to school.

Interpretation of Interviews

The interviews appear to confirm and validate the basic

points made in this paper regarding the critical elements of high schools which must be attended to in order to encourage, attain and sustain high student performance. All three students in some way commented about the stereotypes, ethos, resources, quality of instruction and external support systems available to them. All three saw these factors as having had some influence on their present status, past adjustment and future plans.

An interesting observation derived from the interviews is the fact that the three students saw the same environment differently. Student A who appeared to have had the least adjustment difficulties in school also appeared to have had the least stressful life and showed the strongest academic performance. He progressed from being an average, to being in the high achieving group. Student B who by the time she was a senior had two sons was critical of the level of caring and concern demonstrated by her teachers and expressed considerable distrust of the adults in her building. Student B's status changed from being a high achieving student to a low achieving student. Student C who repeated his junior year because of a gun shot wound was also bitterly critical of the adults in his school and particularly angry about what he perceived to be inferior treatment reflected in poor resources because his school is predominantly black.

I became painfully aware during the interviews of how unprepared in terms of their mastery of the English language these students were. Their grammar and syntax were quite poor, often limiting their ability to express themselves very well. Yet they

were about to face the world. After five years in high school they could not use the standard form of English proficiently. How could that be; and what effect would that have on their future?

Despite the differences in perceptions, difficulties and future goals all three students displayed and expressed a determination to become well adjusted, successful adults. They spoke of acquiring employment to support themselves and their families and of proving to themselves, to their families, and to the world that they are capable and worthy people. These students in my opinion give life to the term resilience. They are set on bouncing back from adversity if given a chance at a decent life. These youth can teach us much about adaptation, survivability and strength, which we as a society can use to benefit all of society in the long term.

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